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CONGREGATIONAL SINGING:

A REPORT

PRESENTED TO THE

Evan. Luth. Ministerium of the State of New York,

AT THEIR

SIXTY-SECOND SYNODICAL SESSION,

Utica, N. Y., Sept. 8, 1857,

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R E P O R T .

Dear brethren:

A variety of statements that have been made to us, relative either to the defectiveness or entire discontinuance of congregational singing in many of our congregations, or to sundry serious abuses introduced into this important part of public worship, and the serious consideration of the remedies demanded by this growing evil, have led our minds to the conclusion, that we can not better discharge our duty in the premises, than by addressing ourselves directly, upon the subject in general, to the congregations connected with our body. What we have to say will, undoubtedly, be more applicable to some congregations than to others, or one part of our address adapted to the circumstances of one place, another part to those in another; and there may be congregations in which our exhortations are entirely uncalled for; yet, as it would be obviously improper for us to discriminate, we address our remarks to all alike, in the hope that even in congregations which have faithfully adhered to the ancient practice of the church, it may be productive of good to direct the attention of church members to the true nature and importance of sacred psalmody.

We would begin with urging upon your most serious consideration, the great and solemn importance of this part of public worship. Since the beginning of time, vocal music has served for the expression of praise and thanksgiving to God, of those deep devotional feelings which the contemplation of his wondrous character and his glorious works, of his righteous judgments and his gracious dealings with his creatures, is so highly fitted to inspire. The inspired volume informs us, that, when Omnipotence laid the foundations of the earth, "the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy." By the morning stars and the sons of God we are here to understand the holy angels, and by the singing and shouting ascribed to them, are denoted those songs of praise and rejoic-

ing in which the emotions that filled them upon beholding the wondrous beauties of the new creation found the most appropriate expression. We have reason to believe, that this mode of praising and worshiping God, in which the morning of creation was solemnized, has been ever since employed by all true and devout children of God in giving utterance to their devotional feelings, their gratitude and love to God. We read of Moses and Miriam, the leaders of God's people from the house of bondage; of David, the man after God's own heart, and of many other worthies of the old covenant church, that they worshiped the God of their fathers, and offered him praise and thanksgiving for signal deliverances and blessings, by lifting up their hearts and voices in sacred song. Our blessed Savior himself was wont to join his disciples in singing hymns of praise to the Almighty Father above, and from her earliest days, the Church of the Redeemer has followed up, with more or less consistency, the practice inaugurated at the morning of creation, continued by the Old Testament saints, and sanctioned and commended by the example of the Great Head of the Church and his immediate disciples. Although this sacred exercise was long distorted and perverted in the gorgeous ritual of the Romish communion, it was fully and effectually restored, by our own Luther, at the glorious reformation, as an element of social or public worship, in which, more than in any other, entire worshipping assemblies are to unite their hearts and voices. When, therefore, we engage in this sacred act, we not only perform a religious duty, enjoy a religious privilege, and give an impulse to our own and each others devotion, but we place ourselves in sweet and blessed communion with God's people of every age and clime, and with the whole church of the present; and not only so, but we attune our stammering tongues to the golden harps and glorious strains of angels around the throne, and prepare ourselves to join in that song of Moses and the Lamb, which now resounds from the lips of countless ransomed and perfected spirits through the mansions of heaven.

Important and rich in blessing as this duty, this privilege, thus obviously is, it is its neglect and frequent abuse, which have induced us to invite our churches, at this present time, to its serious consideration. In our church, as well as in others, it has long been a subject of complaint, that the good old practice of congregational singing, joined in by entire worshipping assemblies, has, in a great measure fallen into disuse, having been, in some congregations partially, in others entirely, abandoned to choirs. This evil has doubtless been, to a great extent, the result of the arrogant proceedings of choirs or their leaders, in appropriating to themselves the entire control and direction of the sacred psalmody of the church, regardless, or in defiance of

the views and feelings of pastor and people, introducing, *ad libitum*, new collections, consulting only their own taste or artistic proficiency in the selection of tunes, managing every thing in their own way, and leaving the congregation no alternative but to succumb to the infliction in mute amazement or disgust. Thus it came, in the course of time, to be regarded as an established rule, that this most essential element of public worship belonged exclusively to choirs, whether well or ill qualified for the discharge of the sacred duty. While some congregations have only in so far yielded to this domination as to follow implicitly the guidance of the choir, the innovation has, in others, established itself in absolute possession of the field. Now we feel bound to say to you, dear brethren, that such a state of things is utterly irreconcilable with duty and with the ends of public worship. For to unite our voices in hymns of adoration and praise to God, is an exercise which is not only commended to us by the example of God's people in all past ages of the church, and constitutes the most delightful occupation of saints and angels round the throne, but is enjoined upon us, as a duty, by direct precept and command. Among the many exhortations given in the psalms to praise the Lord, a great number are, doubtless, to be understood as referring to this peculiar mode of magnifying his name, as is quite evident from a number of other passages, which define the one term by the other, such are the following: "Praise the Lord with harp, sing unto him with psaltery;" "Sing unto him a new song." "Sing forth the honor of his name; make his praise glorious." "All the earth shall worship thee, and shall sing unto thee; they shall sing to thy name." "O give thanks unto the Lord; make known his deeds among the people. Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him;" and many others of like import. In like manner the Apostle Paul exhorts the Ephesians: "Be filled with the spirit; speaking to yourselves in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." And also to the Colossians: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." Thus, then, as a duty enjoined by scripture, as an established institution of the church, as an essential element of social and public worship, in which we are to praise the name of our Maker and Redeemer, to lift up and enliven our own hearts, and to admonish, encourage and edify each other, this act of devotion and worship should be unspeakably precious to our souls; we should hold ourselves under solemn obligations to engage in it statedly and on all suitable occasions—to engage in it with an obedient spirit, with hearts full of gratitude and love.

We can not but deeply lament, that this important and most edifying part of public worship has been, by many of our congregations measurably, by others entirely abandoned to choirs, which, whatever may be the character of those choirs, is utterly wrong. It is so in every point of view. To abandon the sacred psalmody of the church to choirs, often, perhaps generally, quite unfit for the trust, is wrong, because it is to delegate to proxies what is the sacred duty and privilege of the entire congregation and each of its members; because it is an act of worship and devotion which it is impossible to perform by proxy; quite as impossible as it is to offer our supplications and the service of a holy life to God, by proxy. On special occasions it may be proper and desirable that a choir should contribute to the solemnity of the exercises by performing some appropriate piece of music. But if, in the stated and regular services of the sanctuary, the congregation permits the choir wholly, or nearly so, to monopolize the songs of adoration and praise, which ought to be raised by every heart and every tongue, this beautiful and edifying exercise degenerates into an unmeaning performance, and is gradually degraded, by the self-complacent folly of the performers, into a mere theatrical exhibition. It will still more fully appear how inconsistent and wrong it is, thus to neglect this duty and to forego this privilege, when it is considered that, according to the practice of our church in America, the singing of sacred hymns is the only mode in which assembled congregations are enabled to take an active part in the public worship of God. Surely we do not assemble in the courts of the Lord, only to hear our ministers pray and preach, and to have our ears delighted or tortured, as the case may be, by the musical performances of a choir, but to join, with heart and voice, in the manner prescribed by scripture and appointed by the church, in worshiping our God and in singing his praises. It is our decided opinion that, if we can not have congregational singing in our churches, singing conducted in such a manner as to admit of its being joined in by all, it would be better to dispense with this exercise entirely. And with this view of the subject, we deem it our duty to exhort our brethren to exert themselves and to take the necessary measures for the revival of this edifying practice, where it has measurably fallen into disuse, and for its complete restoration, where it has been utterly abandoned. We exhort and beseech the members of our churches to return at once to this scriptural usage, commended to us by the praiseworthy example of our great reformer and of our forefathers, by putting a stop to all usurped dictation or control, by themselves heartily resuming the strains of sacred song, and devoutly uniting their voices in singing hymns of adoration and praise to God, their Maker, their Father and Re-

deemer. To do this fitly and worthily, all that is necessary is, that besides the organist, each congregation should be provided with a serious and competent leader. While we consider this sufficient, we see no reason to object to a good choir, animated by a proper spirit, and content to *serve* the church by simply *leading* the congregation in the singing of tunes every way adapted to the purposes of public worship. But we earnestly entreat you, dear brethren, no longer to commit this important, solemn and edifying part of the public worship of God to a small number of trained singers, but to regard it as your sacred duty and blessed privilege yourselves to worship and praise your God by singing with your own voices, and with heartfelt devotion, the sweet hymns, the beautiful songs of Zion.

There are two points upon which we desire here to add a few words. In the first place, we consider it very important, that it should not be left entirely to the taste of the leader of the choir to select collections of church tunes, or to his caprice to introduce new ones. The injudicious selection and the frequent change of such collections have contributed, as much as any other cause, to the present neglect or discontinuance of congregational singing. These are things in reference to which, as they are essentially connected with the dignity and solemnity of public divine worship, the pastor and elders of the church should be consulted. As these are the persons whose office it is to take care that the services of the sanctuary are conducted in the proper manner, there can not be a single good reason alleged, why an element of public worship so important as the psalmody of the church should be exempt from their supervision, or why choristers should be emancipated from their control. And in the second place, we hold, that it is utterly incompatible with the fitness of things and the solemnity of the Lord's day and house and worship, to adapt secular or profane tunes to the sacred hymns of the church. We know that the practice prevails extensively, of singing hymns to worn out worldly tunes, which, having gone out of fashion in social circles, are deemed good enough for the worship of God. Many of these tunes are fitted only to call up unhallowed or even disgusting associations; but, whatever their character may be, when we consider the inexhaustable wealth of the church in sacred music, the awfulness of the place where the Lord's honor dwelleth, and the solemnity of his worship, we can not but earnestly exhort our brethren to cast or keep out of the precincts consecrated to the worship and praise of God, whatsoever is worldly or profane, and fitted to lure the spirit from the contemplation of things sacred and divine.

In conclusion we repeat, that it is not to choirs themselves that we object, but to the usurpations practiced and the abuses

introduced by them in most of our churches, for many years past. We cheerfully concede the usefulness of choirs, not too large, animated by a devout spirit, content to lead the choral singing of the church, and willing to submit to proper authority and wholesome control. With such a choir, congregations will be able to join heartily in singing our hymns of adoration and praise. And it is this result which we most anxiously desire to effect; it is with this object in view, that we now affectionately address the congregations connected with this body. We ardently desire that our churches may again resound, as they once did, and as those of our German brethren still do, with the melodious strains of sacred psalmody, with the sweet songs of Zion, with hallelujahs to our God and Savior, heartily and fervently joined in by all the members of our worshiping assemblies. We exhort and beseech you, brethren, to let no considerations of expediency, no conventional notions, no obstacles, prevent your return to the good old practice of our evangelical church, of uniting all hearts and voices in songs of adoration and praise to Him who reigns on high, to Him who came on earth and lived and died for our salvation. To do this is your sacred duty and your blessed privilege. And may the great Master of assemblies dispose and enable you thus to glorify him on earth, until he shall call you to your home beyond the skies, there to join in the song of Moses and the Lamb.